

DALHAM PARISH COUNCIL

UPDATE CALL ON UNITARY AUTHORITY PROPOSALS FOR SUFFOLK

7-8pm 16th October 2025

Suffolk County Council arranged an update videoconference call on the current status of the proposals for a unitary authority for Suffolk, hosted by Richard Rout, the councilor and cabinet member responsible for devolution, and Nicola Beach, SCC's CEO. There were 33 attendees and I participated on behalf of Dalham PC.

SCC submitted their proposals for a single unitary authority for Suffolk in September (deadline was 25th September). This included a business case, a summary of which was presented on the call. The Government will now decide between different possibilities (realistically either 1 or 3 unitary authorities, although 2 is possible) and will probably announce their conclusion in November. This will then go into a consultation period, with the decision made by the relevant Minister in early 2026.

Actual implementation would be in April 2028, although a shadow authority would be set up beforehand with elections for this in May 2027. Thereafter the existing districts and county councils would scale down operations (ie no major initiatives) ahead of the transfer of responsibilities in 2028.

SCC's proposals suggest their single unitary authority would have 140 councilors. This compares with 308 district and county councilors at present. The proposal would mean each councilor would have on average around 4200 constituents. This compares with 2500 for each district councilor and over 9500 per county councilor at present. The idea is to help ensure the new councilors are not too remote from local concerns. There would be a maximum of 10-12 parishes per councilor, which is in line with (or actually below) current levels for county councilors. All these proposals are however subject to Local Government Boundary Commission review.

In addition, it proposes 16 so called "area committees" which would help to provide local input for subsets of the authority. The boundaries of areas would follow parish boundaries – parishes would not be split between two (Dalham would appear to fall within Newmarket – other neighbouring ones are Haverhill and Bury St Edmunds). These would have representatives from voluntary bodies, local businesses and councilors but would not interpose in the direct relationship between parishes and the new unitary authority [note: this sounded like a lobbying group, not an executive body].

In administrative terms they reiterated that clerks (and councilors) would be provided with contact points (a "hotline" for clerks) under the new structures to provide direct links to decision makers. There would be 4 to 6 planning committees in a unitary authority – not just one centralized one (i.e there would still be a "West Suffolk" committee for planning issues).

SCC had Grant Thornton develop a business case for their proposal which estimated savings from the current arrangements of £78.2m over the first five years. It also claimed that 2 or 3 unitary authorities would incur net costs rather than making savings (for 3 unitary authorities, over £130m of net costs in first 5 years, with £13m per year extra thereafter) due to the need to "disaggregate" county services such as adult social care, child service provision (e.g. special needs costs) and highways. It was noted that the adult and child care were now 77% of SCC's costs, and their revenues were around £1 billion a year.

The savings would enable some additional spending on other matters and SCC had proposed a £40m investment fund for “market towns” (this apparently included Newmarket, Bury and Haverhill).

It was clarified in Q & A that in the proposed single unitary authority, council tax would be set at the rate currently charged by Mid Suffolk, which is the lowest of the various Suffolk districts (lower than West Suffolk). For West Suffolk householders, the saving would be about £29 per year for a Band D property.

Possible devolution of assets and services from the unitary authority to town and parish councils was outlined. Devolution would be optional not compulsory (ie at the request of parishes) and SCC was clear that some powers would not be appropriate for smaller parishes. Specifically, they noted that devolving substantial planning decisions (as opposed to minor ones) might be difficult for a small parish due to personal connections and issues. Simple planning decisions would be suitable for devolution though (window changes on listed buildings were noted as an example). Parish councilors would need to go through compulsory training before taking any planning decision making powers on.

Both assets and services might be devolved. Most of the assets listed as potential options for devolution would not be relevant to Dalham (e.g. community and sports centres, play areas, cemeteries etc). Small areas of community owned land (verges and open spaces) was the only asset mentioned that seemed as if it might have relevance. Services that might be devolved included grass cutting and public rights of way maintenance, speed limit controls and gritting, clearance of fly tipping and other street cleaning, street names and neighbourhood watch.

Devolved services would be taken on with a pro rata share of the unitary authority’s funding but if a parish wanted to enhance a service (ie more than two verge cuttings per year) that would be a cost for their precept.

The new unitary authority would have representatives on the mayoral authority for East Anglia, whose powers would be different and cover Norfolk as well as Suffolk. Strategic transport decisions, energy projects and adult skills provision were powers that were mentioned as falling within the mayor’s competence.

Given the timescale we are likely to hear the decision after our next meeting in November but before our January meeting. A consultation response will be required.

One further point – SCC is working on changes to the process for parish or town councils to institute their own speed limits and hope to implement within a few months. This is not dependent on the outcome of the Local Government Reform process.

John Riddell

Chairman

Dalham and Dunstall Green Parish Council